

The Homeless Children and Youth Act: Allowing Funding to Meet Local Needs

The Homeless Children and Youth Act is not about more funding, or less funding. It is about ensuring communities are able to use current funding to meet their most urgent needs.

- The HUD definition of homelessness practically excludes the most common situations for families and unaccompanied youth: staying in motels, or temporarily with others because there is no place else to stay. Even if local communities identify these families or youth as having the most pressing unmet needs, communities cannot use HUD homeless assistance funds to serve them, except under extremely limited, nearly impossible, conditions.
- Current law prohibits a Continuum of Care from using more than 10% of its funds to serve families and youth who are homeless under other federal definitions, regardless of local needs.
- HUD has created strong incentives for prioritizing projects that serve people who are chronically homeless (living on the streets or in shelters only), such that communities have little to no incentive to prioritize programs serving families and unaccompanied youth who are homeless under other federal definitions.

The Homeless Children and Youth Act will not “take away” funding from other homeless populations.

- Whether or not newly eligible children and youth receive services will depend on communities’ local needs assessments. Communities that identify greater needs for single adults, or other populations, will be free to prioritize programs to serve them.

HUD’s definition causes communities to waste precious homeless service dollars.

- Most homeless families and youth aren’t supported by an agency that will pay for a motel stay. Ironically, those families who pay for a motel room with their meager employment or disability income do not qualify as homeless for HUD, until they can prove that they can stay for less than 14 days – even while the family in the next room does qualify because someone else is paying for their room.
- Service providers are forced to put families and youth into emergency shelters in order to qualify them for permanent supportive housing or rapid rehousing programs. This is a waste of emergency shelter dollars. Moreover, it creates another destabilizing move.

A truthful definition of homelessness – one that matches the reality of youth and families – will help communities leverage non-federal funding sources to meet needs.

- The federal government is not the sole source of funding for homeless services. Other public and private sources contribute significantly. Yet the HUD definition of homelessness and its Point in Time Count mask the nature and the level of need for families and youth, making it much more difficult to raise awareness of the problem of child and youth homelessness among non-federal sources of funds.
- When the real need is known, and validated by federal agencies, non-federal funders are more likely to contribute. For example, when advocates in suburban Minnesota, Sacramento CA, and rural Wyoming used the more realistic definition of homelessness that schools follow to raise awareness about youth homelessness, local government, community foundations and others contributed funding for youth drop-in centers, housing programs and emergency shelters. The broader definition revealed the true extent of the problem and helped them raise funds for more services.
- In many communities, numbers of homeless children and youth identified by schools and youth agencies are not taken seriously and often downplayed, since the HUD definition and HUD count are the “official” definition and number used by housing agencies and local and state government.